

Negative Capability: A Look at Analysis, Intuition  
and their Roles in the Creative Process

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by

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I remember cautiously sneaking into my first creative writing class, anxiously anticipating that someone might detect the renegade art student and send me back to the painting studio where I belonged. Nobody seemed to notice me, so I sat down. As the last-minute stragglers took their seats, the instructor gave out the first assignment. He wanted a three-page story, ready to discuss by next class. Easy enough. I arrived home that night, which at the time was a cramped dorm room with a tidy bed in one corner and a humming mini-fridge in the other. I sat down at my desk, powered up my computer, situated my requisite bowl of M&M's—and froze. I had no idea what to write! That's why I was taking a creative writing class, to learn *how* to write, creatively! Where do I start? Should I try to be funny? What's a noun again? I tapped the novelty panic button a friend had fastened to my keyboard. It didn't help. I spent most of the night writing and erasing the first line. Sometimes I'd get as far as the first paragraph then, in a wave of despair, delete the whole thing and pace my tiny room. I finally spewed out some semi-autobiographical nonsense about something stupid my dog did on Halloween and went to bed.

In class, we talked about everything from narrative structure to grammar and vocabulary, but nothing about how to deal with the curse of the blank page. When I asked the professor how he came up with ideas, he mumbled between sips of coffee something about inspiration, recommending that I start with an outline. I would have loved to write an outline, if I had an *idea* to outline. As for finding inspiration, did he expect me to sit around and wait for it to strike? Whenever I hear anyone talk about inspiration, I think about something Philip Pullman, author of the *Golden Compass* said, "Amateurs think that if they were inspired all the time, they could be professionals. Professionals know that if they relied on inspiration, they'd be amateurs."<sup>1</sup> I realized if I wanted answers, I'd have to find them on my own.

So how do professionals deal with the difficult task of generating ideas? How do great artists and writers pull thoughtful, meaningful introspection from the primordial abyss of the imagination, especially when those ideas are not forthcoming? More simply, where do good

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Pullman, "About the Writing," *Philip-Pullman.com*, [http://www.philip-pullman.com/about\\_the\\_writing.asp](http://www.philip-pullman.com/about_the_writing.asp) (accessed September 17, 2007)

ideas come from? I've written this paper in the hope of demystifying some of the murk surrounding the creative process. I start by looking at the working methods of some of my favorite authors and artists, analyzing their techniques and finding striking similarities in the way each of them approach creative tasks. I then delve into the science behind the brain, studying the nature of decision-making, looking at the brain systems involved in creativity. In the end, I find that a lot of the confusion surrounding the creative process stems from two conflicting styles of thinking: the prevailing method of deliberate, intentional analytical reasoning and the lesser-known realm of impulse, intuition and unconscious thought. Both styles are essential. Only by finding a balance between analysis and intuition can we successfully navigate the problem of creativity.

Western Civilization has this bizarre preoccupation with explaining everything. We are addicted to a habit-forming need for exposition that is the natural byproduct of such systematic thinking. On top of that, we are obsessive planners. Before the pen even reaches the ink well, we must have a purpose, outlined in advance, that we intend to execute. How closely we follow that plan determines our success or failure. Each step in that plan must carry with it the full weight of precedent. It must arise from what came before, and be firmly rooted in the logic of the previous steps.<sup>2</sup> We must show our work, explain why we took this path instead of another, justifying every drop of ink, because without reason and explanation, we are just goofing off, we are operating in the dark. I actually like drawing in the dark. It's a good way to avoid drawing the same thing twice.

My main objection to the strict discipline of such systematic thinking is that it fosters an obsession with being right.<sup>3</sup> According to Edward De Bono, author of *Lateral Thinking* and an expert on creative brainstorming, "There are times when it may be necessary to be wrong in order to be right at the end."<sup>4</sup> Students are typically crippled by a fear of "doing it wrong," sitting

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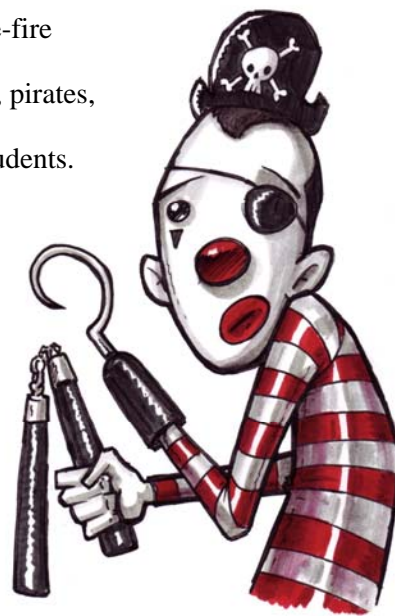
<sup>2</sup> Edward De Bono, *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step-by-Step* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 42.

frozen at their desks, terrified of making a mistake.<sup>5</sup> Keith Johnstone, one of England's premiere improv directors says, "if I want students to accept ideas, I'll ask them to kill ideas first, because then they'll recognize such negativity when it occurs 'accidentally.' 'Doing it wrong' puts everyone in a good mood."<sup>6</sup> Mistrusting their own instincts, students turn to the only resource left that offers any comfort or security: the time-honored sure-fire guarantee of the cliché.<sup>7</sup> I'm still surprised how many ninjas, pirates, and mimes show up in the work of eager young animation students.

As Philip Pullman said, "I couldn't possibly attack rational thinking. It's given us the scientific method, electricity and explanations for the world we live in."<sup>8</sup> I mean, where would we be without the toaster oven? The problem with too much emphasis on reason and analysis is that it's a lot like approaching a poem in the same way you would approach a math problem. "Of course rational thinking is fundamentally important but it isn't the only means of apprehending the world."<sup>9</sup> There is an alternative to the stalwart certainty of intellectual thought, and that alternative lies in the unpredictable spontaneity of the impulsive act.



Intuition is, "the direct knowing of something without the conscious use of reasoning."<sup>10</sup> If you've ever known an answer without knowing how or why you know, then you've experienced an intuitive moment. Gut feelings, hunches, sudden bursts of insight all fall within the scope of intuition—what are often called "Ah-ha!" moments.<sup>11</sup> They are the split-second decisions we make before the cumbersome processes of systematic conscious thought are able to

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers* (New York: Routledge/Theatre Art Books, 1999), 56.

<sup>7</sup> De Bono, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Butler, *Darkness Illuminated: Platform Discussions on 'His Dark Materials' at the National Theater* (London: Oberon Books, 2004), 54.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963), ix.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Clark, *Growing Up Gifted: Developing the Potential of Children at Home and at School, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing Company, 1988), 402.

respond. They are, “the immediate associations that tumble out before we’ve even had time to think.”<sup>12</sup> I used to regard intuitive people in the way I thought of overweight psychics roaming around haunted bed and breakfasts moaning to camera crews about energy readings, or that nutty music teacher who literally marched to the beat of her own drum and always smelled like orange peels and herbal tea. Intuition is not some mysterious force, and it’s not an excuse for acting like an idiot. Intuition is a skill, one that can be developed and mastered like any other.

The first task in the intuitive process is to distract the reasoning conscious part of the brain—to get it out of the way, so the real fun can begin. I don’t know how this works for most people, but ninety-nine percent of my best ideas come to me in the bathroom. I’ll be in the shower, combing my hair or brushing my teeth, preoccupied with my beautification ritual, when a sudden burst of insight knocks me flat. I’ll clamor down the stairs, half-dressed, toothpaste dripping down my face, frantically searching for a scrap of paper, before the idea vanishes. I’ve started keeping a pen in the toothbrush holder next to my minty mouthwash and sport-scented deodorant, just in case. Lynda Barry, independent comic artist and author of *100 Demons*, has a



Reprinted from Lynda Barry, *100 Demons*, p8.  
© 2002 by Lynda Barry.

similar experience when she sits down to paint: “there was something about actually taking the physical object of the brush and having to concentrate on it that occupied the top of my mind. So the back of my mind, where I think stories come from, was free to let the story come.”<sup>13</sup>

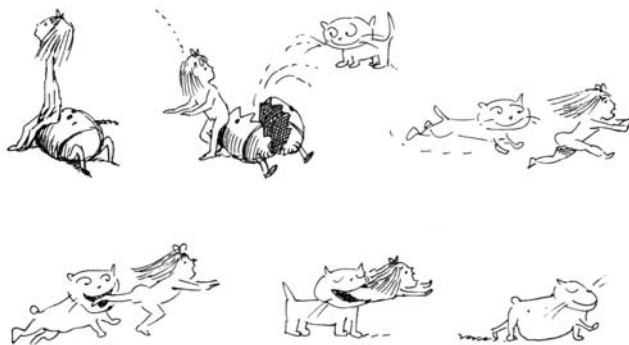
Preoccupying the conscious part of the brain with some repetitive task (painting, drawing, yodeling) allows the intuitive process space to work—just like a babysitter who puts a movie on to keep the kids busy while she raids the pantry

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 84.

<sup>13</sup> Lynda Barry, “Lynda Barry: On Her Comic Strip and Writing Career,” interview by Lynn Neary, *Talk of the Nation*, NPR, October 1, 2002.

and talks on the phone. For some it's music, for others it's taking a walk. I knew a guy who came up with the funniest jokes but only when he was juggling. The important thing is to, "find something that engrosses you enough or makes you want to follow it enough that you're willing to get lost."<sup>14</sup> For me, that has always been drawing.

Doodling in my sketchbook in public is a risky affair. People are constantly walking up to me and asking what I'm drawing. I generally respond with, "I don't know, I haven't finished drawing it yet." At that point, eyebrows usually arch in confusion as the person slowly steps back as if they suddenly realized they were talking to a small duck instead of a person. "I don't know" is not a bad answer. It's a perfectly legitimate way to work. Philip Pullman says, "Anything that's any good has to be discovered in the process of writing it."<sup>15</sup> The same is true for drawing. Back before I knew any better, I'd open my sketchbook and sit silently for five to ten minutes agonizing over what I should draw. Now I start right away, without a thought as to what I'm going to do, confident that whatever I end up with will be worthwhile. When questioned about the process of developing one of her books, Lynda Barry explains, "I never plan out what the story's going to be about ever, ever, ever."<sup>16</sup> Maurice Sendak, author of *Where the Wild Things are*, understanding the influence of music on his own work, developed the habit of, "sitting in front of the record player as though possessed by a dybbuk, and allowing the music to provoke an automatic, stream-of-consciousness kind of drawing ... letting whatever came into my mind come out on the paper."<sup>17</sup>



Reprinted from Maurice Sendak, *Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures*, p.164.  
© 1988 by Maurice Sendak.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Pullman, "Lost the Plot," *The Guardian*, Tuesday, September 30, 2003, <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,5500,1052077,00.html> (accessed September 17, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Barry.

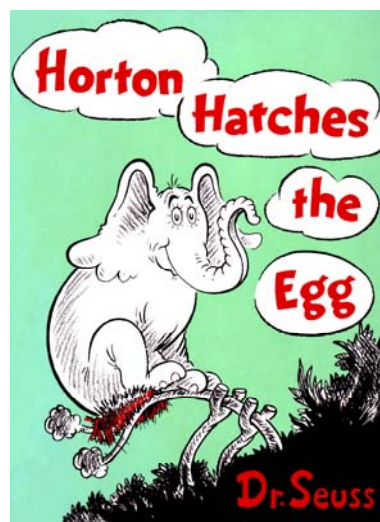
<sup>17</sup> Maurice Sendak, *Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures* (New York: Michael di Capua Books, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1988), 4.

Sendak's automatic drawing technique finds its roots in many of the methods employed by the Surrealists. *Graphic automatism*, as it is commonly called, refers to, "work that emerges without any deliberate intention on the part of the artist; not a single stroke is foreseen in advance, for they are all dictated by immediate impulses issuing from the artist's inner world."<sup>18</sup> The Surrealists believed society was far too dependent upon rational thinking and sought to express their irrational internal worlds using the same kinds of imagery that composed those worlds, namely the images of dreams and the unconscious.<sup>19</sup> While the intentions of Maurice Sendak and Lynda Barry are not necessarily the same as Andre Breton or Giorgio de Chirico, they all used drawing to reach past the meager pickings of the rational world in search of the mysterious forces that lie just beneath the mind's surface.

Reason is in its very nature exclusive; it, "works within a single frame of reference and throws out what is not relevant."<sup>20</sup> One of the benefits of working intuitively is that you begin to see the true value of the irrelevant and the incredible spontaneity it brings to your work—just like the first time Dr. Seuss met Horton the elephant:

Sometimes you have luck when you are doodling. I did one day when I was drawing some trees. Then I began drawing elephants. I had a window that was open, and the wind blew the elephant on top of a tree. I looked at it and said, "What do you suppose that elephant is doing there?" The answer was: "He is hatching an egg." Then all I had to do was write a book about it. I have left that window open ever since, but it's never happened again.<sup>21</sup>

Imagine if Dr. Seuss had grumbled about having his papers blown all over, cleaned up the mess and returned to his carefully laid out schedule. Would we still have Horton? Would Horton have hatched that egg and gone on to save



Cover from Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hatches the Egg*.  
© 1940 by Dr. Seuss

<sup>18</sup> František Šmejkal, *Surrealist Drawings* (London: Octopus Books Limited, 1974), 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> De Bono, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Fensch, *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodore Geisel* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1997), 139.

Whoville from certain doom? We can choose to view surprises as meaningless accidents or interruptions, irrelevant to the task before us, or we can trust our intuition, remaining open to the unexpected, allowing it to take us places that we would have never thought of otherwise.

The intuitive process is also referred to as “negative capability”. The poet, John Keats, first coined the term in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas, in 1817, “Negative capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”<sup>22</sup> Philip Pullman refers to it as, “a state of mind where you become aware of shadows and things moving about in the mist, as it were. If you look at them directly, they vanish, so you’ve got to be prepared to look away and be happy with not knowing fully what these things are going on around you.”<sup>23</sup> Negative capability is a hard skill to master, like juggling chainsaws blindfolded—if you lose the rhythm or doubt yourself, even for an instant, it’s over. I’ve learned that when a character or an idea is ready to present itself, it will do so. But if I try to force it into existence before it’s ready, the idea will crumble back into the abyss. Maybe it will come back, maybe it won’t? I understand that, “it’s no good straining after it because it doesn’t come if you strain for it. You have to relax into it, and that’s difficult to do unless you’re comfortable with being in twilight, and many people aren’t.”<sup>24</sup> When working in negative capability, each stride forward becomes an act of faith. You step out with the hope that when your foot comes down, the next concept, the next word, the next piece of the drawing will be there to catch you. Lynda Barry does it, “one word at a time. And it’s hard to believe that the word—that it’s going to be there, but it is.”<sup>25</sup>

What you are actually building with each new word, with each successive drawing, are the believable, emotionally realized characters that will inhabit the world you’ve painstakingly built one atom at a time. The unexpected surprise is how real those characters will seem once you meet them on the other side of the abyss. Dr Seuss said, “If you doodle enough, the

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<sup>22</sup> Butler, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Barry.

characters begin to take over themselves.”<sup>26</sup> He wasn’t being figurative. There comes a point when a character will boldly stare back at you from whatever piece of paper it happens to inhabit and deliberately refuse to do what it’s told. A character will behave like this, according to Philip Pullman, “because it knows very firmly what it wants to be, even though it isn’t very articulate yet. It’ll go easily in this direction and very firmly resist going in that, but I won’t know why; I just have to shrug and say ‘OK—you’re the boss.’”<sup>27</sup> The difficult part is surrendering to the will of that character and trusting that it knows best. If it’s done right, you’ll end up with a character whose personality is so convincing, people will line up outside your door asking for its autograph. As Chuck Jones explains:



Our job was not to invent what Bugs Bunny did but to report his doings. Just as I, at seven, upon reading Tom Sawyer, would have been outraged at the suggestion that Mark Twain or anybody else invented Tom and Huckleberry Finn and their company. Tom Sawyer happened. He was not imaginary. He was real. What else can he be but real? And there can be no doubt that Mark Twain shared that belief.<sup>28</sup>

Achieving this kind of realistic response, where characters behave as if they have wills and desires of their own, happens only to those who have earned it through years of dedication. Amateurs need not apply. I long for the day when I can form a strong emotional bond with my own characters, like what happened to Lynda Barry when she finished work on her illustrated novel, *Cruddy*:

Roberta stopped talking. She said the last words and they were so clearly the last words and it was very strange. On one hand, I was overjoyed to be finished and that state lasted for a while. And then I felt funny, not sad really, but disoriented because she was gone and she’d been so alive in my head for so long and now she is totally gone. Nowhere to be found.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Fensch, 139.

<sup>27</sup> Phillip Pullman, “Voluntary Service,” *The Guardian*, Saturday, December 28, 2002, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/politicsphilosophyandsociety/story/0,6000,865562,00.html> (accessed September 17, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Chuck Jones, *Chuck Amuck: The Life and Times of an Animated Cartoonist* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1989), 13.

<sup>29</sup> Lynda Barry. “Interview with Lynda Barry,” interview by Benny Shaboy, *Studio Notes#27* (November, 1999 to January, 2000).

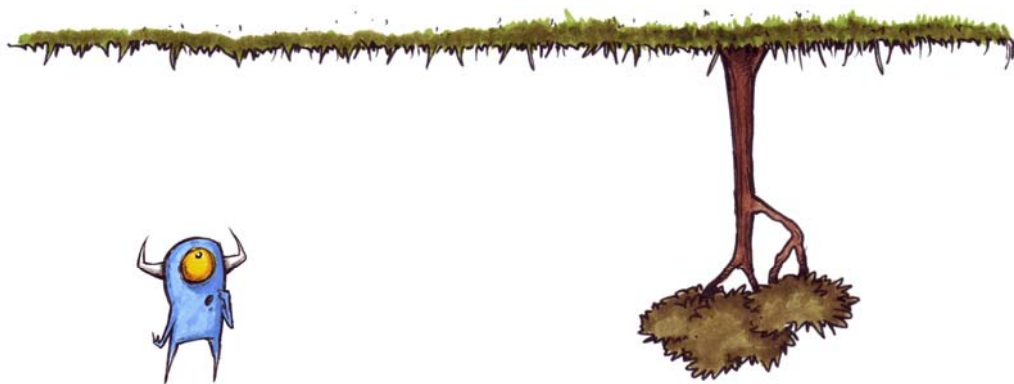
The only experience I've had that even comes close to this is when I've come to the end of a particularly engrossing novel. When the adventure is over and I put the book down for the last time, I actually feel an odd pang of mourning. I wander around for the next couple of days trying to fill the void left by the absence of the novel's characters. This is the ultimate reward of negative capability, the ability to lose yourself in your own work (or the work of someone else) and emerge with vibrant, living characters that you and your audience have come to love.

While the intuitive process might rub uncomfortably close to the nonsensical and can be unpredictable, negative capability is not an excuse for chaos. We set reason aside for the moment to allow ideas to evolve freely; however, that does not give us license to go completely insane.

Dr. Seuss explains:

This is the crux ... a man with two heads is not a story. It is a situation to be built upon logically. He must have two hats and two toothbrushes. Don't go wild with hair made of purple seaweed, or live fireflies for eyeballs ... Children analyze fantasy. They know you're kidding them. There's got to be logic in the way you kid them. Their fun is pretending ... making believe they believe it.<sup>30</sup>

Nonsense is a wonderful tool, but there has to be sense within that nonsense. If we set up a world with certain rules and suddenly violate those rules, we destroy its believability. We can use random events to generate unforeseen possibilities, but at some point, we have to obey the logic that those random events have produced. If trees suddenly start growing out of the sky in an otherwise realistic world, we have a lot of explaining to do. It's okay to, "be spontaneous, just don't be deliberately insane or random simply to prove how clever you are."<sup>31</sup>



<sup>30</sup> Thomas Fensch, *The Man Who was Dr. Seuss: The Life and Work of Theodore Geisel* (Woodlands, Texas: New Century Books, 2000), 97.

<sup>31</sup> Johnstone, 70.

The price of working intuitively is that it is incredibly wasteful and unbelievably time consuming. Typically, ninety-percent of my ideas end up in the waste bin. You should see the stack of papers I've accumulated just in writing this paper. According to Robert McKee, even screenwriting, "demands the invention of far more material than you can possibly use."<sup>32</sup> Dead ends, ideas that didn't pan out, alternative ways of weaving a particular paragraph, all end up as wadded up balls of paper scattered on the floor under my desk, and that's when the ideas are free-flowing. Sometimes, for no particular reason, the ideas slow to a trickle. Moments like that require, "the capacity to sit still in front of an empty sheet of paper for hour upon hour and feel that your time is being valuably spent."<sup>33</sup> What makes it all worthwhile is the understanding that all those wadded up pieces of paper, all those hours spent developing ideas that will never see the light of day, are not really going to waste. I know that I would never have reached that one golden gem of an idea without all the doodles and scribbled bursts of insight that preceded it. All the ideas that were great in and of themselves, yet for some reason didn't fit into the larger scheme, essentially influence the finished work, adding to its character and authenticity. In the end, I realize that nothing in this process is really wasted.

A skill that is crucial to honing the intuitive instinct is the ability to make quick decisions. Conscious thinking is deliberate, even tentative, but it is by no means slow. You have to learn to recognize what your instincts are telling you and act based on those instincts before the self-conscious process of analysis has time to cripple your intuition. Don't be too concerned with whether or not that action is right or wrong. We're more focused on generating possibilities than excluding inefficiencies.<sup>34</sup> Understandably, "we live in a world that assumes that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making it."<sup>35</sup> The reality is that,

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<sup>32</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Reagan Books, 1997), 76.)

<sup>33</sup> Pullman, "About the Writing."

<sup>34</sup> De Bono, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Gladwell, 13.

“decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately.”<sup>36</sup>

The part of the brain that allows us to use intuition and make such snap judgments is the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, referred to by brain researchers as the “adaptive unconscious.” This is not the same as the Freudian dynamic unconscious which is, “a dark and murky place filled with desires and memories and fantasies that [are] too disturbing for us to think about

consciously.”<sup>37</sup> Instead, the adaptive unconscious is, “a kind of giant computer that quickly and quietly processes a lot of

the data we need in order to keep functioning as

human beings.”<sup>38</sup> The prefrontal cortex is a uniquely human characteristic, “it is species specific, that is, humans share this area of the brain with no other life form.”<sup>39</sup> The



ventromedial area acts as a massive filtering mechanism, sorting through the vast amount of input bombarding our senses. This part of our brain acts as a kind of “mental valet,” seeing to it that the minor details of life are being dealt with while freeing up the brain to take care of more pressing issues.<sup>40</sup> In the book *Blink: the Power of Thinking without Thinking*, which first sparked my interest in the adaptive unconscious, Malcolm Gladwell states that, “people with damage to their ventromedial area are perfectly rational. They can be highly intelligent and functional, but they lack judgment. More precisely, they don’t have that mental valet in their unconscious that frees them up to concentrate on what really matters.”<sup>41</sup> I was fascinated by the idea that people could go about their daily lives without the benefit of intuition. I couldn’t imagine being

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Clark, 400.

<sup>40</sup> Gladwell, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 59.

completely dependent on conscious decision-making, unable to read subtle emotions in others, existing without the gut impulses and hunches that I take for granted.

In terms of evolution, consciousness is a relatively new arrival. The systems responsible for unconscious thought are much older and process information faster than those used for calculative reasoning.<sup>42</sup> In his book, *The Emotional Brain*, Joseph Ledoux explores the evolution of the brain's fear system in hopes of shedding light on the origins of unconscious emotional processes. He claims that, "feelings of fear are the byproduct of the evolution of two neural systems: one that mediates defensive behavior and one that creates consciousness."<sup>43</sup> The systems responsible for defensive behavior are also responsible for intuition and originated much sooner than conscious systems. Though they process information faster, those systems do not interpret data in the same way as conscious systems nor do they carry as much detailed information.<sup>44</sup> That is why we can have a fear response and react before we are fully aware of what is chasing us.<sup>45</sup>

Consciousness sits at the top of all the brain's systems, sending out instructions and receiving the results of those processes, taking credit for all the work going on below the surface.<sup>46</sup> Ledoux points out that, "conscious content comes from processing, and we are never consciously aware of the processing itself but only of the outcome."<sup>47</sup> In the case of intuition, the ventromedial area is trying to communicate concepts that the conscious structures are unable or too distracted to process. It looks for other ways to communicate, sending, "its messages through weirdly indirect channels, such as the sweat glands in the palms of our hands."<sup>48</sup> Working intuitively and relying on instinct is the ability to pick up on those signals and make meaningful decisions based on that information.

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<sup>42</sup> Joseph Ledoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon and Shuster Paperbacks, 1996), 19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Gladwell, 10.

The adaptive unconscious draws its information from the vast reservoir of knowledge stored by our everyday experiences. The quality and repetition of those experiences determines the kinds of information that will be stored in that reservoir.<sup>49</sup> I cringe whenever I hear amateurish art students refuse to conduct research or practice their skills because they're afraid of contaminating the purity of their artistic vision. They claim to be relying on instinct, but they're actually retarding those instincts through lack of stimulation and undernourishment. The quality of a person's intuitive responses is a direct function of research, rehearsal, and repetition. Anyone who has ever played a game of basketball understands that it, "is an intricate, high-speed game filled with split-second, spontaneous decisions. But that spontaneity is possible only when everyone first engages in hours of highly repetitive and structured practice."<sup>50</sup> The reason a professional basketball game looks so effortless is that the players' efforts all took place over months and years preceding the game. Relying on instinct does not give a person license to neglect the preparation and skills required to keep those instincts sharp. Working intuitively is not an excuse for laziness.

Improvisational acting draws heavily on instinct and requires years of practice to master. When performing what is known as a Harold, improv actors, "would get up onstage, without any idea whatsoever of what character they would be playing or what plot they would be acting out, take a random suggestion from the audience, and then, without so much as a moment's consultation, make up a thirty-minute play from scratch."<sup>51</sup> Improv is a kind of choreographed spontaneity. Actors rehearse, but not for any specific performance. They practice in order to get comfortable working with the other members of their group and to get used to not knowing what's coming next.<sup>52</sup> Improv is based on one simple rule: *Yes and*. "Take what your partner says, accept it, and build on it."<sup>53</sup> It's also called the rule of agreement. It means that "no" is not

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>53</sup> Rob Kozlowski, *The Art of Chicago Improv: Shortcuts to Long-Form Improvisation* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2002), 2.

allowed. If your partner says you're a monkey, then you're a monkey. If you say that you're in the Poconos, then you're in the Poconos. Accept it and build on it. Disagreeing, contradicting what your fellow actors are saying, or attempting to control the flow of the story will destroy the plot's natural progression.<sup>54</sup> After years of rehearsal, actors learn to avoid situations that will kill a story dead in its tracks. They work together trying to keep the story alive, in much the same way that an artist or a writer will try to keep their characters alive.

Steering clear of "no," trying to avoid the outright rejection of ideas, is also one of the key rules of creative brainstorming.<sup>55</sup> Analytical thinking is exclusive, focused on differences and limitations, emphasizing what we cannot do. Such negativity brings the process of generating ideas to a halt.<sup>56</sup> Often, I'll hear students get genuinely excited about an idea, then give up when they can't figure out how to pull it off. If you think an idea is great, don't give up on it just because you're faced with some technical limitations. There is no reason to kill an idea before you've had a chance to see where it leads, especially if that idea takes you to a surprising and unusual place.

Just because I arrive at my ideas through unconventional methods, my work doesn't have to be limited to the strange and the sublime. Despite the fact that I work intuitively, my ideas are not that "artsy" or "experimental." My animation is straightforward gag humor with tightly laid out camera work telling a relatively simple story. Working intuitively is about generating ideas in new and interesting ways while staying open to the unexpected turns a story might take.<sup>57</sup> The style of the resulting film, the medium I choose to employ, the final structure of that film are entirely dependent on formal considerations and are at their core conscious deliberate decisions. Those decisions have little to do with the means I used to arrive at that initial idea. Hopefully, that process will inform those decisions, but ultimately each phase of production is governed by different priorities.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>55</sup> De Bono, 150.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 49.

Take Horatio, for example. He is the closest thing I have to a living character of the kind Chuck Jones described. Horatio is a far cry from the emotionally realized clarity of a Tom Sawyer, but he's all I have, and I care about him deeply. Horatio is a monster. He has been appearing regularly in my sketchbook for years begging me to cast him in one of my animations, and I finally included him in the film that accompanies this paper. Initially, dreaming up a story for Horatio came very slowly until I decided to give Horatio a friend, a little redheaded eight-year-old girl named Veronica. Once Veronica arrived on the scene, the story ideas began to flow faster than I could write them down. In one variation, Horatio lives alone on a hill, visited each day by a gradually aging Veronica until eventually Horatio is alone again. That concept was way too depressing. In



another variation, Veronica trick-or-treats an old mansion believed to house a horrible monster. One of my favorite alternatives involves Horatio competing for Veronica's attention against a malfunctioning toy robot. Eventually, I combined a few of these ideas and came up with the story I used as my final thesis project. The point is that I arrived at each of these ideas through the painstaking process of gradual discovery. I set reason aside temporarily and allowed the story to evolve naturally. However, at some point I had to let reason out of its cage, turning the story over to the scrutiny of analysis, story structure and style. Rational, systematic thinking ultimately needs to be given its due. Eventually, the children have to untie the babysitter.

The role of intuition in creativity is simple: it gets things started, keeps things moving, it turns a blank page into one full of ideas. Whether or not those ideas are useful is not the province of instinct but that of reason. Intuition is generative; reason is developmental.<sup>58</sup> Bring analysis into the process too early and you cripple your ability to make intuitive decisions. Let intuition run amuck and you end up with disconnected, nebulous ideas that never really amount to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 50.

anything. In Greek mythology “Ceres wandered the world searching for her daughter, Persephone, carrying two torches: Reason and Intuition.”<sup>59</sup> When searching for that elusive story idea, we must make use of both reason and intuition. Keep in mind, “when we talk about analytic versus intuitive decision-making, neither is good or bad. What is bad is if you use either of them in an inappropriate circumstance.”<sup>60</sup> The trick is in finding a balance between the open-ended kinds of thinking that make intuition so fluid and the creative kinds of problem solving that make analytical reasoning so strong.

The whole point of the intuitive process, the real, accessible, salient virtue of approaching your work without intent, expectation or prejudice is that you maintain the capacity to surprise yourself. As Robert Frost pointed out, “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader, no surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.”<sup>61</sup> If my aim is to make my audience laugh, how can I expect to accomplish that if I have no idea what makes me laugh? In weaving together any story, be it a joke, an animated cartoon or a ten-thousand page paper about the nature of intuition, we are attempting to connect with our readers. We don’t want them to dispassionately regard our work, to devour and consume it with the same neutrality that they have toward a potato chip. We want to discover something fresh and true within ourselves and pass on that sense of discovery. Negative capability keeps us open to the unexpected, allowing us the ability to surprise ourselves and hopefully astonish our viewers.

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<sup>59</sup> Spolin, x.

<sup>60</sup> Gladwell, 143.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Frost, Edward Connery Lathem, and Lawrence Thompson, *The Robert Frost Reader: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 440.

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